

Operation ephedra – tackling street sex work

A multi-agency approach to tackling street sex work and the exploitation of vulnerable females.

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Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Diversion Prevention Reoffending
Topic	Anti-social behaviour Community engagement Crime prevention Neighbourhood crime Operational policing Violence against women and girls Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	Metropolitan Police Service
Contact	Adam Hall
Email address	adam.hall@met.police.uk
Region	London

Key details

Partners	Police Community safety partnership Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Health services Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	February 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Communities Offenders Victims Women

Aim

The aims of operation ephedra are to:

- offer support to the most vulnerable people who may or may not come to police notice
- address the root causes of street sex work
- arrest males soliciting and exploiting sex workers
- gather intelligence on potential pimps and bodyguards
- work with the female charity Streetlight to refer male offenders to diversion courses

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of operation ephedra are to:

- increase in referrals to support services
- increase in arrests of those soliciting or exploiting sex workers
- reduction in street sex work
- reduction in street crime offences such as persistent loitering and kerb crawling

Description

Tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) within the community is a key priority for the mayor's office for policing and crime (MOPAC) and the metropolitan police service (MPS). Partners often work in silos to tackle street sex work so the MPS has adopted a multi-agency approach to problem-solving street sex work. This work is called operation ephedra.

Operation ephedra emerged following a ward panel meeting where street sex work and anti-social behaviour were raised as local issues needing addressing in Lambeth, South London. A ward sergeant sought funding to tackle these problems and successfully bid for £5,000 from MPS and for £25,000 over two months from Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) funding. This funding enabled operation ephedra to launch overseen by the ward sergeant as project lead and with buy-in from senior leadership teams.

Operation ephedra involves weekly plain-clothed patrols led by a small team of police constables (PCs). The PCs conduct the patrols as overtime and are selected based on their suitability for dealing with VAWG and vulnerability related issues. Before joining operation ephedra, the selected PCs receive in-house training delivered by the project lead. This training covers how best to manage the patrols by moving the dialogue away from arrest targets and towards supporting victims of VAWG.

In advance of a patrol, the operation ephedra PCs work with local ward sergeants to identify suitable patrol locations. A location will be selected based on its identification as a hot-spot for service users and as an area where the patrol team can be visible. The PCs will also liaise with local partner agencies including drug outreach teams, medical teams, VAWG outreach and Lambeth housing teams. These partner agencies are invited to join the patrol and engage in community engagement activities.

On the night of a patrol, the operation ephedra PCs partner with a PC from the local policing team for that ward. This approach enables more officers to become upskilled in the approach of operation ephedra. The PCs may also be joined by a representative from a local partner agency.

The deployment of partner agencies assists in the recovery of persons who have addiction or mental health issues and enables multi-agency problem-solving thinking to occur.

The patrols involve a combination of diversion tactics and enforcement options. For example, male offenders can be offered a conditional caution to attend a “you choose” course run by Streetlight – a charity who wish to safeguard and encourage women to exit the street sex work industry. Female sex workers can be referred to medical, homeless and drugs and alcohol services as well as sexual health screening and mental health support services. The patrols can also involve “soup kitchens” led by the police with support from the Compass Group. The Compass Group offer hot drinks and snacks to encourage service users to seek/engage with conversations around their complex needs. These conversations help identify the root causes of street sex work.

Evaluation

An evaluation has not been conducted for this intervention. Work returns from operation ephedra are reviewed in conjunction with weekly crime data to ascertain the effectiveness of the operation. Deployments are set each week based on the data. A monthly report is produced measuring trends over a longer period.

Overall impact

Operation ephedra has seen 24 males arrested for sexual offences and 23 females have been referred to support services.

A partner agency provided the following feedback on the soup kitchen element of operation ephedra:

“Firstly, thank you and the team for all your time and effort with organising and managing this project, it has become a vital part of the outreach work that is being done in Brixton for services and some of the most vulnerable people that need support. Not only does it provide a physical safe space but also the information that is shared has a long lasting beneficial impact”.

The success across Lambeth has attracted attention from police in Southwark who have a similar issue. Officers within Southwark are due to receive the training shortly.

Learning

- Gaining support from senior leadership teams for operations such as ephedra is crucial. This process involves clearly communicating to senior leaders that the operation not only focuses on arrests but also on the education of offenders and support of vulnerable people.
- Each officer selected to go on the training for operation ephedra is chosen for their vulnerability and victim focused mind-set. This mindset is key to making the operation a success.
- As a result of needing to train officers to work on this operation, there is only a small pool of officers to choose from. To combat issues around natural attrition in the Met the project lead has offered training across the basic command unit (BCU) to obtain a larger pool of officers. There are currently seven PCs trained for operation ephedra in Lambeth.
- The ambition is to have regular patrols every Friday and Saturday. However, this has proved challenging with many competing demands on resources. Operation ephedra runs as an extended shift for PCs, meaning factors such as officer burnout and wellbeing need to be considered.
- Bad weather played a part in some patrols and no people were seen. It was still useful for the operation ephedra team as two new sex workers were identified from outside the area. These individuals were included in the vulnerable female referral work.
- It is important to recognise that each local area faces its own unique challenges in terms of on street sex work. What works best in one area may not be as effective in another. The operation ephedra PCs invite sergeants to visit the patrols conducted in other areas to combat this. Additionally, the team offer follow up support after a patrol for any sergeant or team wishing to get in touch through calls or emails.
- The role of partner agencies in patrols needs careful consideration. Being seen with police officers risks damaging the relationships these agencies have built up with people involved in street sex crime. For this reason, risk assessments are completed before each deployment, participating officers are always plain-clothed, and the partner agencies only join the police for engagement activities.

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